

Aspects of the cigarette epidemic

An ounce of prevention, a pound of promotion

Advertising and counteradvertising of cigarettes in the United States*

Kenneth E. Warner

AS READERS of this Journal are well aware, the tobacco industry has long been an aggressive promoter of cigarettes in all of the important public media. In the United States, home of the world's highest per capita cigarette consumption,¹ expenditure on the promotion of cigarettes exceeds that on any other product, totalling over \$1 billion per year. According to frequent reports in *Advertising Age*, a weekly marketing publication, cigarette manufacturers are the single largest advertiser in American newspapers and magazines, accounting for over 15% of newspaper product advertising and 10% of magazine advertising. In 1978, R. J. Reynolds Industries alone spent over \$70 million on magazine advertising, which made it the nation's largest magazine advertiser. And two of the remaining five major American tobacco companies ranked among the next four top advertisers. Cigarette manufacturers' dominance of product promotion extends beyond the print media. In 1980, cigarettes accounted for 31% of the \$423 million spent on outdoor product advertising; the five largest cigarette companies were the top five outdoor advertisers. Close to half of all billboards in the United States carry cigarette advertisements.^{2,4}

The promotion of cigarettes in the United States has undergone an extraordinary transformation since 1970. In 1971, Congress banished cigarette advertisements from America's television and radio airwaves. Before that time, tobacco's dominance of broadcast advertising had mirrored its current prominence in the print media. With fully two-thirds of cigarette promotional dollars then devoted to the broadcast media, tobacco's share of newspaper and magazine advertising was relatively modest.³ The forced cessation of broadcast advertising led to the conversion of cigarette advertising to its current dominance of the print media.

The story of events leading up to the broadcast ad ban is a fascinating one, evoking a collage of images of legal forces,

principles, and smoke-filled-room politics — all at work concurrently.^{5,7} A major feature of this story is the "competition" between prosmoking and antismoking messages on television and radio from 1967 to 1970, the result of a federal ruling that broadcasters had to donate air time to the anti-smoking cause to "balance" time devoted to prosmoking advertising. This is described below. Suffice it here to note that the leaders of the smoking-and-health community hailed the cigarette ad ban as a major victory. But some analysts have labelled it a Pyrrhic victory, concluding that the broadcast battle between prosmoking and antismoking promotion was being won by the latter; and the ad ban marked the conclusion of that battle.^{7,8}

The cessation of broadcast advertising of cigarettes put an end to significant public media presentation of the smoking-and-health message. There is no legal requirement that the print media balance space devoted to the prosmoking and antismoking causes. Given the financial resources of the two interests — the principal factor that now determines the allocation of advertising space — the result has been the proliferation of cigarette promotion and the near-demise of media promotion of non-smoking.

The "Fairness Doctrine", antismoking messages, and the broadcast ad ban

The saga of the broadcast ad ban began in 1967, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruled that smoking was a controversial issue. Under the Commission's "Fairness Doctrine", broadcasters were required to balance time devoted to both sides of controversial issues. Hence, the ruling meant that broadcasters had to donate air time to smoking-and-health groups (which could not afford to purchase significant amounts of time) in order to balance the numerous prosmoking ads.

"Balance" was never interpreted either by broadcasters or by the FCC to require parity. At its peak, in 1970, air time donated for the antismoking messages totalled only a third of prosmoking ad time. In the preceding years, the fraction was considerably smaller; in the first year of the requirement, some stations provided air time equal to 10% or less of that purchased by cigarette companies. Furthermore, throughout

*Prepared by request.

Department of Health Planning and Administration, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, U.S.A.

Kenneth E. Warner, PhD, Associate Professor and Chairman.

Reprints: Associate Professor K. E. Warner.

the period the donated time was never concentrated in prime viewing time, as were prosmoking commercials. Nevertheless, the donated time did represent a significant subsidy to smoking-and-health groups — in 1970, the air time was worth some \$75 million (in 1970 dollars) — and as a result of the “Fairness Doctrine” ads, viewers and listeners were thoroughly exposed to messages graphically illustrating the hazards of smoking and extolling the virtues of “kicking the habit”.⁵

The behavioural impact of the antismoking messages has been the subject of repeated analyses, the majority of which have concluded that the antismoking messages depressed cigarette consumption more than prosmoking ads encouraged it, at least during the three-year period in which the two sides shared broadcast prominence.^{7,12} Supportive of this conclusion, which derives from statistical empirical analyses, is the fact that the tobacco industry offered to cease broadcast advertising voluntarily, so long as Congress would grant the industry exemption from the antitrust laws, since collusion would be required to effect a voluntary elimination of all broadcast cigarette advertising. The industry’s offer was declined, though Congress enacted its essence in the *Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act of 1970*, the Act that banned cigarette advertising from the nation’s air waves from January 2, 1971. An important secondary impact of the ad ban was its *de facto* elimination of the “Fairness Doctrine’s” requirement of donated time for the antismoking cause.

Was the industry’s move to withdraw its ads evidence of the effectiveness of the antismoking messages?⁶ Quite possibly. It would thus follow that the ad ban was detrimental to public health, since it effectively eliminated a significant deterrent to smoking — the subsidized “Fairness Doctrine” messages.⁸ But a balancing argument is that, over time, the impact might have been expected to diminish as the novelty of the publicity wore off, and as smokers most susceptible to the antismoking message were “weeded out”.

In short, although the wisdom of the ad ban policy cannot be fully evaluated, it is clear that the immediate impact of the ban was to remove a strong deterrent to smoking. It is also important to consider the obstacles that confronted the pre-ban antismoking messages: they were few in number compared to the prosmoking ads; the former were clustered in off hours, the latter in prime time; and the antismoking messages were amateurish — they were produced quickly, with limited budgets, by people who lacked the skills in marketing research and psychology that were devoted to the promotion of cigarettes. One advertising executive has interpreted the success of the antismoking messages, in light of these serious limitations, as evidence that a well-planned, professional campaign could have a dramatic impact on smoking. Health, she contends, can be sold just like toothpaste . . . or cigarettes.¹³

But today, this is not to be. The “Fairness Doctrine” messages are ancient history in the war against smoking. The current administration in Washington has significantly reduced the budget of the Federal Office on Smoking and Health and has exhibited no inclination to take on the tobacco interests. The major voluntary agencies have made some attempts to address the problem of smoking,¹⁴ but their resources are too limited to finance a substantial national

paid advertising campaign. The three major American voluntary associations — the American Cancer Society, the American Lung Association, and the American Heart Association — annually spend a combined total of \$10 million on smoking education, yet messages designed for the mass media constitute only a fraction of this total.⁴ Furthermore, political realities also appear to constrain their willingness to attack tobacco aggressively.

Cigarette advertising in the print media today

With the demise of broadcast advertising of cigarettes, the manufacturers shifted promotional activities to the print media. Before 1971 television received two-thirds of the industry’s advertising expenditures (\$308 million in 1970), but, within a few years after the broadcast ad ban, all of the former TV expenditures were rechannelled into the remaining legal avenues of cigarette promotion. Newspaper cigarette advertising grew from \$14 million in 1970, the last year of broadcast advertising, to \$105 million in 1975 and \$187 million in 1978. In the same years, magazine advertising rose from \$50 million to \$184 million and outdoor promotional expenditure from \$7 million to \$149 million.³ Cigarette companies are far and away the leading print advertisers. In addition to newspapers, magazines, and billboards, promotional vehicles have included sponsorship of sporting events, and distribution of product samples.

There is no “Fairness Doctrine” for the print media requiring the recipients of tobacco advertising dollars to donate space to the antismoking cause. As a result, the current annual \$1 billion-plus in cigarette promotion is countered by no more than a few million dollars worth of public service smoking-and-health messages. (Lewit *et al.* report that the number of antismoking messages aired on TV fell by 80% after the broadcast ad ban.¹⁵)

The importance of cigarette advertising in the print media has two dimensions. The first and obvious one is the direct impact: prosmoking advertising may encourage people to start smoking, especially young people, and it may support the continuation of smoking by individuals who are considering quitting.

The tobacco industry has long contended that its advertising is directed solely at adults and, further, that cigarette advertising involves producers’ vying for shares of a fixed pie, rather than attempting to increase the size of the pie. That is, the manufacturers claim, advertising does not induce more people to smoke; rather, it attempts to encourage brand loyalty.

Empirical studies of the impact of cigarette advertising on per capita consumption have produced ambiguous results. Three studies have concluded that the effect is at most a weak one.^{7,8,16} By contrast, leaders of the smoking-and-health community are convinced that advertising does increase consumption. They point out that advertising creates “a positive climate of social acceptability for smoking, which encourages new smokers to join the market”.¹⁷ Given the general diffusion of the smoking habit throughout this century, and the analytically complicating effects of changes in the product (for example the growth of filtered cigarettes and, recently, the profusion of low-tar-and-nicotine cigarettes), it is difficult statistically to isolate the impact of advertising.

Regarding the industry's claim that it targets its advertising solely at adults (often defined as people over 21 years of age), evidence points strongly to the contrary. According to Hutchings, cigarette manufacturers placed half of their 1980 magazine advertising dollars in magazines having high readerships among 18-to-24 year-olds. The majority of these dollars went into magazines having high female readerships; young females constitute the largest growth potential in the market.³ Furthermore, a recent Federal Trade Commission investigation of cigarette advertising discovered advertising plans that demonstrated clear intentions of going after the youth market. A 1975 Brown & Williamson advertising strategy document recommended that, to attract "starters" to Viceroy cigarettes, the company should "present the cigarette as one of the few initiations into the adult world". The company was encouraged "to the best of your ability, (to) relate the cigarette to 'pot', wine, beer, sex, etc."⁴

The second dimension of the importance of cigarette advertising represents an indirect impact: advertising can translate into editorial policy. As a result of their economic dependence on tobacco revenues, magazines have been reluctant to discuss the issue of smoking and health in their news and editorial pages. A recent study of coverage of the hazards of smoking in 12 prominent women's magazines found that coverage was minimal, dramatically less than that which the health importance of smoking would suggest.² Only one of the magazines studied carried a significant number of relevant articles, and it was the only one that refused to accept cigarette advertising. The senior author of the study reports that, in an article on cancer risks she wrote for a woman's magazine, her introductory discussion of cigarettes and lung cancer was moved to the end of the article, and to the rear of the magazine. The journal article also documents an example of a magazine that was "punished" for publishing articles on smoking and health by the removal of all cigarette advertising and the assurance by the manufacturers that the magazine "would never get cigarette advertising again". The dependence of many magazines on tobacco advertising makes the threat of loss of these revenues, explicit or assumed, a serious consideration in the development of editorial policy.

Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) in the United States has managed to identify only about a dozen major adult American general circulation magazines that refuse to accept cigarette advertising.¹⁸ Yet even these magazines are not entirely immune to the pressure of the tobacco advertising dollar on editorial policy. The cigarette producers are conglomerates, selling literally hundreds of everyday products, including food products, soft drinks, beer, and cosmetics. Thus, the magazine that "takes on" the subject of smoking and health risks losing a substantial portion of its potential advertising revenues, both regarding cigarettes and other heavily advertised products. This phenomenon may even affect the editorial policy of the broadcast media, since they derive substantial revenues from advertising the cigarette companies' non-tobacco products.

Counteradvertising today

The lesson of the "Fairness Doctrine" era is that counteradvertising can have an impact disproportionate to

the resources devoted to it. An antismoking "commercial" can use either accurate images of smoking or satirical portrayals of prosmoking ads to emphasize the inherent contradictions in cigarette ads. The counteradvertisement also has the advantage of surprise, and novelty. An effective illustration of both phenomena was this Journal's "Marble Row man" cover story in the July 24, 1982, issue.¹⁹

Counteradvertisements can produce substantial "bang for the buck." But the problem confronted today by the smoking-and-health community is a dearth of bucks. With the demise of donated air time and the restrictions on federal smoking-and-health money, the financial resources available to mount antismoking media campaigns are limited primarily to those of the major voluntary agencies — and their budgets will not permit substantial efforts — and such donated space as the print and broadcast media allocate to smoking-and-health in the form of public service messages. In short, the era of significant counteradvertising in the United States is, at least for now, a matter of history.

A few current low-budget counteradvertising efforts deserve mention for the principle they illustrate: the effective antismoking message is not simply one that graphically portrays the illness consequences of smoking, but rather one that is of sufficient interest or controversy to command the attention of the media as being newsworthy. If a counteradvertisement can gain free coverage as a news item, its distribution and, hence, impact can be magnified manyfold. In the United States, DOC (Doctors Ought to Care) has followed this strategy particularly well.²⁰ Indeed, many Americans who have never seen the original DOC counterads, the distribution of which has been severely limited by DOC's financial resources, have been exposed to the ads and to a discussion of their purpose through newspaper stories on the work of the organization. Similarly, many Americans have heard of Australia's BUGA-UP campaign, again through news coverage, though very few of us have seen the BUGA-UP artistry first-hand. Finally, the now-famous Brooke Shields antismoking poster, originated by DOC, borrowed by the United States' Government Office on Smoking and Health, and, with underwriting from *Prevention* magazine, distributed by the American Lung Association, became famous precisely because of the controversy surrounding the use of Ms Shields as an antismoking model. The issue received widespread coverage both in the print and in broadcast media, disseminating the image to a vastly larger population than DOC, the government, or the ALA ever could have hoped to reach with their own financial resources. To borrow a phrase from the contemporary United States political lexicon, one might label this phenomenon the trickle-down theory of counteradvertising.

A final word

The debate over the nature and propriety of cigarette advertising is certain to continue for years to come in the United States, and in many other countries around the world. A few countries, including Italy, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland⁴ have banned all cigarette advertising. Evidence from the "Fairness Doctrine" experience suggests that groups interested in combating the consequences of cigarette advertising should devote energy to confronting

cigarette promotion on its own turf — through use of advertising techniques employed in the public media.⁴ While the financial resources for such efforts are very limited, creative counteradvertising has succeeded in gaining exposure considerably in excess of that which can be purchased directly.

In the United States, the important bottom line is that the combination of all antismoking activities — from media advertising, to school education, to publication of scientific research — has succeeded in reversing the century-old growth in smoking. United States cigarette consumption levels today are well below those that would have been anticipated in the absence of the antismoking campaign. Further declines in smoking are anticipated.¹¹

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Patricia Warner for inciteful suggestions on a previous draft.

References

1. *Controlling the smoking epidemic*. Report of the WHO Expert Committee on Smoking Control. Geneva: World Health Organization, 1979.
2. Whelan M, Sheridan J, Meister A, Mosher A. Analysis of coverage of tobacco hazards in women's magazines. *J Public Health Policy* 1981; 2: 28-35.
3. Hutchings R. A review of the nature and extent of cigarette advertising in the United States. In: *Procedures of National Conference on Smoking or Health: developing a blueprint for action-proceedings*. New York: American Cancer Society, 1982: 249-262.
4. Fullerton J. Federal initiatives with a high potential for success: role of the federal trade commission and need for further legislation. In: *National Conference on Smoking or Health, op cit.*: 168-195.
5. Warner E. Clearing the airwaves: the cigarette ad ban revisited. *Policy Analysis* 1979; 5: 435-450.
6. Friedman M. Public policy and the smoking-health controversy. Lexington: Lexington Books, 1975.
7. Doron G. The smoking paradox: public regulation in the cigarette industry. Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Books, 1979.
8. Hamilton JL. The demand for cigarettes: advertising, the health scare, and the cigarette advertising ban. *Rev Econ Stat* 1972; 54: 401-411.
9. Warner E. The effects of the anti-smoking campaign on cigarette consumption. *Am J Public Health* 1977; 67: 645-650.
10. Ippolito A, Murphy RD, Sant D. Consumer responses to cigarette health information. Washington: Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Economics Staff Report, 1979.
11. Warner E. Cigarette smoking in the 1970's: the impact of the antismoking campaign on consumption. *Science* 1981; 211: 729-731.
12. Schneider L, Klein B, Murphy KM. Governmental regulation of cigarette health information. *J Law Econ* 1981; 24: 575-611.
13. Green P. The mass media anti-smoking campaign around the world. In: Steinfeld J, et al, eds. *Proceedings of the Third World Conference on Smoking and Health*, Washington: U.S. DHEW Pub. no. (NIH)77-1413, vol 2, 1977: 245-253.
14. National Conference on Smoking or Health, *op. cit.*
15. Lewit M, Coate D, Grossman M. The effects of government regulation on teenage smoking. *J Law Econ* 1981; 24: 545-569.
16. Schmalensee R. The economics of advertising. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1972.
17. Foote E. Advertising and tobacco. *JAMA* 1981; 245: 1667-1668.
18. Anonymous. Magazines without cigarette advertising. *ASH Smoking Health Rev* 1982; 12: 14.
19. Bittoun R. A tracheostomy for the Marlboro man. *Med J Aust* 1982; 2: 69-70.
20. Blum A. Medicine vs. Madison Avenue. *JAMA* 1980; 243: 739-740.

The 1982 Western Australian Smoking and Tobacco Products Advertisements Bill

Stephen Woodward

REPEATED STUDIES identify three major factors (not ranked in order) as the most potent initiators of smoking among children.¹⁴ They are parental and family example, peer pressure, and advertising and promotion. Of these factors, advertising and promotion are most amenable to control by legislation. In solving any public health problem, it is logical and cost-effective to work from the easiest to the most difficult obstacles. All Australian States have legislation providing for tobacco taxes, information services on the health effects of smoking, and the prohibition of cigarette sales to minors. Apart from the Federal Broadcasting and Television Act of 1942 which prevents

direct advertising of cigarettes on TV and radio, South Australia has the only legislation which prevents some forms of tobacco advertising: it is not permitted on State Transport Authority property.

The Smoking and Tobacco Products Advertisements Bill was introduced to the Western Australian Parliament by a government private member, Dr G. T. Dadour, after the Minister for Health had indicated that Cabinet would not support it. The Bill called for a prohibition of advertising of tobacco products in areas over which the Western Australian Government has constitutional control (including billboards, newspapers, publications printed in Western Australia, on public transport and by the distribution of free samples). The aim of the Bill was to complement existing governmental and voluntary agency programmes designed to reduce the prevalence of cigarette smoking.

A project of the Australian Council on Smoking and

Australian Council on Smoking and Health, 705 Murray Street, West Perth, Western Australia 6005.

Stephen D. Woodward, BSc (Hons), Education and Research Officer.
Reprints: Mr Woodward.